

Report by Shirley Kagan, Professor of Theater, Hampden-Sydney College, on Eva Renzulli's presentation "Haunted Ambiguity: Representation of Jews in the Italian Renaissance"

Monday, June 26th

Announcements:

- Dorset Noble informs group of production dates at La Fenice and backstage tour.
- Luis Shein announces performance of Vivaldi at Ca' Rezzonico
- Paul Michelson announces a performance at the Romanian center
- Jonathan Malino announces trip to Tirol
- Will Wells announces writing workshop meeting
- Katia Sunshine announces trip to Verona opera
- Murray Baumgarten seeks recorder for Thursday session
- Shaul Bassi announces the week's schedule

Recorder's Reports:

- Robin Russin presents report on Deanna Shemek's talk on Thursday, June 22, a.m.
- Katia Sunshine presents report on Murray Baumgarten's talk same day, p.m.

Today's Speaker: Eva Renzulli

Talk title: "Haunted Ambiguity: Representation of Jews in the Italian Renaissance"
(handout available)

Dr. Renzulli's talk centered on depictions of Jews in 15th and 16th Century Venetian art. She noted that these images address Jews both directly and indirectly and organized her talk around three principal groups of images:

Jews as pictured by Jews;

Positive Christian images of Jews

Negative Christian images of Jews.

Examples of the first group of images include:

- Illustrated "Haggadah" – contracted for the Norsa family executed by Abraham Farissol in 1515. We viewed two images, before and after restoration.
- Other images which a Christian artist (perhaps Bonifacio di Pitati?) was asked to illustrate and although these are of seder rituals they include many non-Jewish details such as typically noble Venetian dress and a group of rabbis feasting rather than studying.
- Almost contemporary publication entitled "Book of Customs" which shows day to day rituals such as fetching water, baking matzot, holidays and parties drawn with simple lines and free of conventional iconography. In one notable example the book shows a happy, newly delivered mother in her bed surrounded by chattering visitors engaged in eating cake. In a later (1593) more formal and professionally executed Christian version of the image the standing mother is surrounded by severe looking men while the father is seated in the place of honor.

Despite the fact that Jesus, Mary and Joseph were Jews living in a land of Jews, Christian

art possess precious few references to Jewish life. The images of the holy family are intended to educate a largely illiterate Christian laity in keeping with Gregory the Great's 6th Century proclamations. Thus even in the positive images, Christian ambivalence towards Jews is often present.

Examples of the second group include:

- Cima de Conegliano's "Annunciation", which depicts, as was almost always the case, a very contemporary Venetian looking Mary. However, the clear, legible Hebrew lettering which appears on a bedpost indicates a knowledge of Jews and their alphabet.
- Vittore Carpaccio's "Life of the Virgin" has similar Hebrew lettering, this time on a doorpost, spelling out the name of the lord. There is also a frame within the household with an inscription from Psalms. Otherwise the household is completely Venetian with the exception of Joseph's "Jewish" hat.
- Also by Carpaccio is the "Flowering Rod", set in a fairly realistic depiction of a temple. Within the temple are two Hebrew inscriptions and a Menorah. The figure of the High Priest, resplendent in hat, fringes and pomegranate bells is borrowed from an engraving in the Biblia Latina. His garb is meant to conform with the description of the Cohen's robes detailed in Exodus. Carpaccio indicates a desire to be faithful to Jewish documentation, but his imagery comes from a variety of places including a Byzantine coin, so obviously he is working from mixed sources. The yellow turbans on the congregants may indicate that Carpaccio was familiar with contemporary Jews, though this painting pre-dates the Ghetto's founding.
- The 1514 image of "St. Stephen Preaching in Jerusalem" depicts interpretations of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher and the Dome of the Rock probably taken from wood cuts carved on site. There are also turbaned spectators, probably muslims. All these indicate an Encyclopedic knowledge of other cultures.

The most easily found images sadly fall into the last category. Venice prided itself on its system of Justice, easily seen from the multiple representations of Justice covering the Palazzo Ducale. The city gave the impression that the travesty of Simon of Trent could not be repeated in Venice. Nevertheless, a large array of anti-semitic images were prevalent in Venetian art up until around 1517.

Examples from the third group include:

- Michele di Matteo da Bologna's "Constantine and Helena: Three scenes from the Legend of the True Cross. In these drawings a Jewish character, so evil he must be depicted in profile so as not to contaminate the viewer with his "evil eye" attempt to prevent Helena from finding the Cross since then his people will be "lost. After being dropped into a well for a week, the Jew sees reason, recants and converts to Christianity. The Cross is found and wreaks miracles.
- Jacopo da Varagine's "Death of the Virgin" shows a High Priest who attempts to overturn the Virgin's bier at the funeral procession since she gave life to Christ. His hands turn to wax whereupon he repents and converts.
- Giovanni Bellini's "Crucifixion" contains the skulls and tombstones representative of the old dead law in the background, contrasting sharply with the new, living law.
- Albrecht Durer's "Christ Among the Doctors" contained a very negative pictorial code of the doctors.

- Giorgione's (or perhaps Titian's) depiction of "Christ led to the Calvary" has what would undoubtedly be read as a Jew leading Christ by a rope tied around his neck.
- In Andrea Mantegna's "Ecce Homo" a figure of a Jew is seen standing behind Christ asking for his crucifixion.

All of these paintings and representations were. Of course, sponsored or endorsed by the church.

The events of 1517 focus the church away from the Jews as the primary enemy. The two largest events are:

The encroachment of the Turks;
The arrival of Martin Luther.

Accordingly, after 1517 it becomes difficult to find such virulent anti-semitism in art.

Respondent - Robin Russin:

Is there something specifically Venetian in these representations?

Eva Renzulli: Carpaccio really wants to get into the details of everyday life, like Hebrew script.

Dana Katz: Later Ferrerese art also rich in detail.

Russin: In Jewish community universal literacy de-necessitates reliance on imagery, right?

Renzulli: Yes. Christian tradition has manuals that are almost exclusively illustrated. Perhaps the Jewish "Book of Customs" was the invention of that tradition?

Shirley Kagan: How does this type of art not come into conflict with the idea of graven images?

Katz and Paul Hamburg: it doesn't conform with that tradition but the subjects of this art are almost exclusively non-idolatrous depictions of daily life.

Russin: When does the depiction of Jews as part of ancient culture originate?

Renzulli: Around the 6th Century.

Russin: Do the images of "bad" Jews reinvigorate the idea of "Good" Christians by contrast?

Renzulli: There is a more complex relationship. The negative and positive are often conflated such as the Hellenistic tradition of sculpture which yield Moses, David and Aristotle.

Mehnaz Afridi: Ghettoization (boxed-inness) of Jewish community may be partly responsible for their negative depiction in art until new “others” take over the negative imagination.

Baumgarten: Many paintings have been moved from churches to museums. How does their “afterlife” in new location factor into current Italian education?

Renzulli: Most Italians don't read the paintings the way they had been read in the past. For example, they don't know that the man pulling the rope in Giogione (Titan) painting is a Jew.

Katz: A famous contemporary controversy around this precise subject surrounds the Norsa Madonna in the most important church in Mantova. Because of its anti-semitic content it is hidden in a dark corner of the church, but when a suggestion was made to move it to a museum, chaos ensued. That community, at least, is very well aware of the meaning of the painting.